

Preliminary Assessment of the pottery from Moss Street Depot, York

A medium-sized collection of pottery from an evaluation at Moss Street Depot, York, was submitted for spot-dating and a preliminary assessment. Four phases of activity are represented in the collection ranging from the mid Roman period to the 17th century.

Description

Twenty pottery assemblages were examined and the likely terminus post quem for each group was determined (Table 1). In some cases this required making an interpretation of the likely taphonomy of the assemblage and this is discussed further below (Assessment: Chronological and functional interpretation). Most of the material was of Roman date with much smaller assemblages of medieval and post-medieval date.

Table 1

context	feature	SF No	phase	description	spot date (Roman dates are given as Monaghan Ceramic Phases)
1002			pmed	pmed soil	19/20
1005			pmed	pmed soil	M17
1016	3	3		garden soil	L12
1016	4	3		garden soil	L12
1016	5	3		garden soil	L12
1017		3		garden soil	E16
1018		3		garden soil	L12
1019	4	1		backfill of Roman inhumation	CP3a-early 3b
1020		3		garden soil	19/20
1023		1		definition spit over F6	M12+
1036	6	1		Ditch backfill	CP3b+L12+
1037	6	1		Ditch backfill	CP3b+m12
1040	4	1		backfill of Roman inhumation	CP3a-early 3b
1051	10	2		backfill of med pit	M12+
1053	4	1		backfill of Roman inhumation	CP3a-early 3b
1054	11	2		backfill of med pit	
1055	12	1		backfill of Roman scoop	CP3a
1056	13	2		backfill of med pit	E13
1057	14	1		backfill of Roman scoop	CP3a
1070	17	2		backfill of med ditch	M12
1071	17	2		backfill of med ditch	E13

1072	17	2	backfill of med ditch	E13
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Roman pottery

There is a small quantity of 1st/2nd century pottery present on the site, represented by Samian ware and probably some Ebor ware and other coarsewares. These sherds appear to be much more abraded than the rest of the assemblage. There is also some Antonine Samian ware, but these vessels were probably actually used and discarded in the 3rd century.

The first period of activity to be well-represented on the site is the early 3rd century. Definite finds of this date are of utilitarian wares used for cooking. The Roman scoop backfill contains only pottery of this date. Samian vessels However, most of the early 3rd century sherds actually come from slightly later features.

Mid/Late 3rd century pottery includes mortaria, amphorae, colour-coated beakers (both Nene Valley and Moselkeramik) and Ebor flagons. There is also a smashed NVCC 'castor box' with sooting on the lower body and base. This material comes mainly from the backfills of Ditch 6 but similar vessels in a poorer condition were recovered from the backfill of the inhumation burials.

Later Roman pottery is scarce but there is a residual sherd of late 4th century Crambeck parchment ware in one of the medieval garden soils.

Medieval pottery

The majority of the medieval potsherds are probably of mid 12th to early 13th century date. These include a smashed splash-glazed jug from Pit 10. Material of a similar date was found in the Roman ditch 6 fill. Later 12th- to early 13th-century pottery was present in the medieval garden soils, the upper fill of Ditch 6 and in Ditch 3. Two of the ditch fills contain sherds which are probably 13th century whereas the remaining contexts all produced sherds of types which could be either of 12th or early 13th-century date. There are no sherds of Brandsby type, nor any later medieval wares.

Post-medieval pottery

Three of the garden soils contain post-medieval material. This consisted of Ryedale ware and a possible Humber ware cup from context 1017, a mid 17th-century stamped clay tobacco pipe from context 1005 and sherds of 19th/20th-century flower pots from context 1002.

Assessment

Chronological and functional interpretation

The Roman pottery from Ditch 6 appears to consist of material of both early 3rd and late 3rd century date, with the later sherds being fresher and probably including smashed vessels. Thus, the ditch might

have cut through occupation deposits of early 3rd century date (contemporary with the scoop) or it may have been open for a long period in the 3rd century. There is very little difference between the two fills (1036 and 1037) and this suggests that material of both dates was part of the same, later 3rd century backfill. There are, however, sherds of medieval pottery in both fills, mid 12th century or later in the earlier and later 12th century in the later fill. It is presumed that these sherds are intrusive although this is a decision that should be made by someone familiar with the circumstances of excavation.

The pottery from the inhumation burial backfills is of exactly the same types as were present in the ditch fills but their condition suggests that whilst the ditch fill was backfilled with contemporary rubbish the pottery in the grave fills was present in soil used to backfill the graves.

A quick scan of the residual pottery from the site suggests that there is little late Roman occupation. Even if deposits of this date were destroyed by medieval horticulture it is unlikely that the pottery would have been completely destroyed too, although one might expect it to be heavily abraded.

As with all medieval sites in York, there is a problem in dating the earliest post-Roman re-occupation of the site because the main pottery type of this period, York Gritty ware, was in use for a long period of time, from the later 11th to the mid 13th century. In this case, however, there is no reason to postulate any occupation of the site prior to the mid 12th century, since all the assemblages containing York Gritty sherds also contain types of the mid 12th century or later. The smashed splash-glazed pitch from pit 10 is conclusive evidence that the site was occupied by c.1150. Unfortunately, the rim of the vessel is missing and it is this which would distinguish mid 12th-century vessels, with a wide neck and, probably a tubular spout, from slightly later vessels with a taller neck and the handle attached at the rim tip from late 12th-century vessels in which the handle is applied below the rim. To judge by the pottery in the garden soils the lower soils are either contemporary with the pits and ditch 10 or post-date that occupation and contain no contemporary pottery. If the latter is true, then the soils are perhaps more likely to reflect a reversion to agriculture and ploughing than gardening. The pottery in these soils is not, however, notably abraded. A change in use of the site probably took place during the deposition of soils 1005 and 1017, since these contain unabraded sherds of post-medieval date. Although this activity could have begun in the 16th century (context 1017) it is just as likely that contexts 1017 and 1005 are contemporary and date to the mid 17th century. A final change of use took place in the 19th century since the presence of flowerpots in context 1002 suggests that by this stage the site had become a domestic garden.

Potential of the pottery for artefact research

The Roman assemblages, especially that from the backfill of Ditch 6, appear to show that Roman activity on the site was short-lived but that it can be divided into an early 3rd-century phase characterised by typical occupation debris followed by a later 3rd century phase which stands out both in the range of wares present, their function and their quality. Unusual types include the mortaria, which are more common in this phase than one would expect, amphorae, which include both oil containing and wine-containing vessels, including sherds from one type which requires identification

and perhaps publication. However, the most distinctive feature is the quantity and quality of the colour-coated beakers, which include several vessels with well-executed barbotine decoration, and the castor box. Given that there is evidence for burial on the site, it is possible that this pottery was related to ritual feasting, and particularly drinking. However, it seems from the stratigraphy and taphonomy of the pottery assemblages as if the excavated burials post-date this late 3rd century pottery use. If so, then perhaps there are earlier burials on the site.

These tentative conclusions require a sherd-by-sherd record of the pottery to support or refute them. Furthermore a basic archive of the pottery will need to be made before deposition in the Yorkshire Museum.

The splash-glazed vessel from Pit 10 is also in its way worthy of attention. Pottery earlier than the late 12th century is still quite rare in York and it is certainly unusual to find a semi-complete vessel.

The Moss Street site therefore has potential for the study of both Roman and medieval ceramics. In part this potential is due to the fact that activity on the site seems to be limited and punctuated by long periods of inactivity and yet the pottery is not heavily abraded and consists of large sherds which, with a larger excavation, offer the possibility both of reconstruction of vessels and the reconstruction of assemblages. Furthermore, it may be possible to establish crossfits (joining sherds) between sherds in different contexts and these may illuminate the way in which the site strata were accumulated. This makes it possible to try and isolate pottery relating to different phases of activity in a way which is much more difficult on more heavily occupied and reworked urban sites.

Costing

Making a primary record of the Roman pottery: 6 hours at £25.00 plus VAT = £150 plus VAT

Reconstruction, illustration of splash-glazed vessel from pit 10: £30 plus VAT

Appendix: List of medieval and later pottery

Context	REFNO	Trench	Cname	Subfabric	Form	Nosh	NoV	Part	Description
1002			LPMLOC		FLP	2	2	R	
1005	2	1	PIPECLAY		PIPE	1	1	BS	STAMPED HEEL;17THC BORE DIAM
1016		4	YG		JAR	1	1	R	
1016		4	YSPL		JUG	3	3	BS	
1016		4	YSPL		JAR	1	1	BS	
1016	2	4	YG		JAR	5	5	BS	
1016	2	4	YG		JAR	4	4	R	
1016	2	4	YORK		JUG	2	2	BS	
1016	2	4	YORK		JAR	3	3	BS	
1016	2	4	YSPL	LIGHT-FIRING GRITTY	JUG	3	3	BS	
1016	2	4	YSPL	RED SANDY FABRIC	JUG	2	2	BS	
1016	3	4	YG		JAR	10	10	BS	
1016	3	4	YG		JAR	1	1	R	
1016	3	4	YORK		JAR	3	3	BS	
1016	3	4	YORK		JAR	1	1	R	
1016	3	4	YSPL		JUG	1	1	B	
1016	4	4	YORK		JUG	1	1	BS	
1017	6	5	HUM?		CUP	1	1	R	REDUCED LEAD GLAZE INT AND EXT
1017	6	5	RYEDALE		PANC	1	1	R	
1018	7		YG		JAR	3	3	BS	
1018	7		YG		JAR	1	1	B	
1018	7		YORK?		JUG	1	1	BS	CUGL
1018	7		YSPL		JUG	1	1	B	
1018	7		YSPL		JUG	1	1	BS	
1020	10	5	LPMLOC		FLP	7	7	BS	
1020	10	5	STSL		POSS	2	1	BS	
1023	9	4	RED SANDY		JUG	1	1	BS	
1023	9	4	YG		JAR	1	1	R	
1023	9	4	YG		JAR	5	5	BS	
1036	12	4	RTIL			3	3	BS	
1036	12	4	YG		JAR	6	6	BS	
1036	12	4	YORK?		JAR	1	1	BS	
1037	13	4	YSPL		JUG	1	1	BS	
1051	15		RTIL			2	2	BS	
1051	15		YG		JAR	1	1	R	
1051	15		YG		JAR	1	1	BS	
1051	15		YSPL		JUG	25	1	BS	STRAP HANDLE WITH TWO THUMB IMPR AT B/H JOIN
1056			YG		JAR	4	4	BS	

Context	REFNO	Trench	Cname	Subfabric	Form	Nosh	NoV	Part	Description
1056			YORK		JUG	1	1	BS	THUMBED BASE;CUGL;E13TH C
1070	64	5	YG		JAR	5	5	BS	
1070	64	5	YG		JAR	1	1	R	
1070	64	5	YORK		JAR	2	2	BS	
1070	64	5	YSPL	LIGHT-FIRING GRITTY	JUG	1	1	BS	
1071	65	5	YG		JAR	1	1	BS	
1071	65	5	YORK		JUG	2	2	H	
1071	65	5	YORK		JUG	1	1	B	
1071	65	5	YORK		JAR	1	1	B	
1072	63	5	MTIL		RIDGE	1	1	BS	
1072	63	5	YG		JAR	1	1	R	
1072	63	5	YG		JAR	5	5	BS	
1072	63	5	YORK		JUG	1	1	BS	RIBBED NECK;CUGL;E13THC
1072	63	5	YORK		JAR	2	2	BS	
1072	63	5	YSPL	LIGHT-FIRING GRITTY	JUG	1	1	BS	
1072	63	5	YSPL		JUG	1	1	BS	